
“You’ll Find Out When You Get Your Paper Back”

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There are two different questions which the student had, and which the instructor failed to answer: how much weight will be given the term paper in determining the student’s final grade; and how will the paper be evaluated when it’s graded? The instructor’s failure to respond requires a different analysis for each of these two questions.

I will first take up the instructor’s refusal to tell the student how much weight would be given to the term paper in determining the final grade. Of the two, this refusal is perhaps the easiest to criticize. At my university, and at many others that I’m familiar with, the student has a right, as a matter of publicized university policy, to know at the beginning of a course the methods that will be used in calculating the final course grade. Of course, a requirement to divulge “the methods” used is a vague one. Just how much detail does an instructor have to provide? But this quibble is easily answered by examining the faculty’s practice, for this will reveal what counts as the settled interpretation of university policy. Indeed, every course syllabus that I’ve seen includes at a minimum some accounting of the weight that will be given to each of the course requirements in assigning a final grade.

So at least at my university, and at many others, this student has a right to know how much the term paper will be weighted, and the instructor has the obligation to provide this information.

But perhaps these events occurred at a college that has no similar institutional policy; or if it does, there is no settled faculty practice of providing information about weighting. Under these circumstances, it might be said, the student has no legitimate expectation, and the instructor violates no norm of conduct.

Even if there is such a benighted place, the instructor’s behavior can still be faulted on the grounds that failure to provide the information about weighting impedes rather than fosters the student’s academic progress. Without the information about weighting, the student not only is unable to protect his or her interest in getting the best possible final grade. Perhaps more importantly, the student does not know whether to devote more, equal, or less time to writing than to reading, to reasoning than to memorizing, in order to acquire the skills and knowledge which are appropriate for a beginning student in philosophy. This information is especially important to provide to a student like this one who is “be-fuddled by philosophy in general and this course in particular.” Probably every beginning philosophy student requires the guidance which the weighting information provides, since very few will have had any prior experience with the subject matter in any form.

If it’s granted that a basic obligation of the teaching role is to promote rather than impede the student’s academic and intellectual progress, then this instructor has violated that duty by not providing the student with information necessary for properly mastering the subject matter. Since this duty reflects an obligation assumed by all teachers, it has been violated regardless of the local policies or practices at the instructor’s college.

Some people may want to suggest that by not providing the information to the student, the instructor is violating his or her right to autonomy. When the weighting is not disclosed, students are denied information which they need to make well-informed decisions about their academic lives. If they are forced to make these decisions in ignorance of important facts, they are likely to act in ways which compromise their fundamental values and goals.

But this appeal to the student’s right to autonomy is weak and incomplete. For one thing, the right to autonomy does not include any general right to whatever information which it might be in one’s self-

interest to have, and so it's not apparent how respect for autonomy requires the disclosure of the information on weighting. And secondly, the right to autonomy alone can provide no recourse against the instructor of an elective course (as in this case) who conscientiously informs students, before the end of the drop period, that they will not be told how the course requirements are weighted. Students can then make an informed decision whether to take the class. Their right to autonomy has not been violated. If we think a wrong is still being done, it cannot be a violation of a right that's involved, but a violation of a duty which teachers have to students.

Now what of the second question the instructor refused to answer, when the student was not told how the term paper would be evaluated? The moral assessment of this behavior must be more complex, because it will be affected by the context into which the bare facts of the case example are placed. The instructor's refusal may appear more defensible in one context than in another, though I will argue that at bottom it is morally justified in neither.

For the first context, imagine that the term paper is the only substantial writing exercise that the student will have, and that there is no opportunity to revise the paper before a grade is given. Under these circumstances, failing to inform the student of the standards that will be applied to his or her written work is grossly unfair. The student who gets a low grade on the paper will be penalized for not having learned what was not being taught, either didactically or through experience with critical feedback. Both the student and I would suspect that the instructor's grading of the paper was capricious, because he or she really had no standards, and was just too cowardly to confess it.

This criticism suggests a different possible context, in which the instructor's refusal seems more benign on its face. Suppose that although there is only one term paper for which a grade is given, the student may submit as many drafts as he or she would like (up to the final deadline),

and the instructor will offer constructive criticism and suggestions on each of these. It may be argued that in this way the student learns what the standards are for a good paper in philosophy, by hands-on experience under the teacher's guidance. When the grade is finally assigned at the end of that process, the student is not being unfairly judged by standards never taught. The conclusion, therefore, is that in this context the refusal to *tell* the student what the standards are is not objectionable.

The conclusion is too hasty. It may be granted that some such experience is a necessary part of teaching students what the standards are for good philosophical writing, and of teaching them how to incorporate those standards in their own work. But it doesn't follow that it is sufficient. Not only should the instructor show students what the standards are; he or she should also tell them what they are. This is so for at least two reasons.

First, if the standards are described to the student from the outset, the student is likely to hit closer to the mark with the first paper, and is then in a better position to learn more sophisticated refinements of the standards being used. For example, a standard often applied to philosophy papers is that the student anticipate and fairly respond to a plausible objection. Now there's much that is vague about this standard. What counts as a "plausible objection" and a "fair response" depends mightily on the particulars, and it's a rare beginning student who does a decent job with objections in his or her first paper attempt. But if the student is not told in advance that this is one of the standards used, then most likely there will not be even the crudest attempt at considering an objection. All the instructor can do then is to waste time telling the student after the fact that the standard exists, when instead the first paper could have been the opportunity for correcting and refining the student's understanding of it. In this way, the failure to describe the standards used for philosophical writing leads to wasted teaching opportunities.

Second, publicizing the standards of evaluation helps guard against inconsistencies and oversights in their application, as my own experience attests. I use a set of five criteria against which each student paper is judged. In my comments and grading, I indicate specifically how well I believe the student has met each criterion. This not only serves as a checklist which helps me remember consistently to apply all criteria to each paper. It also provides a basis for the student to judge the fairness and accuracy of my evaluation, which can be used as part of a reasoned request to change a grade. If I note that the student failed to make any use of the readings, and the student points out passages to the contrary, then I must reconsider the grade given, in the interest of fairness to the student and allegiance to my own announced standards.

Of course, this teacher, like too many others, may be unwilling to surrender any

of the prerogatives of power which teachers wield in classrooms. The instructor who refuses to reveal his or her standards of evaluation writes a *carte blanche* for arbitrary or sloppy grading and effectively disarms students' objections, since they are given no benchmarks against which they can in turn judge the instructor's evaluation of their work.

This refusal to enter into any fair dialogue with students about the merit of their work is not only a disservice to them, but also to philosophy. It confirms the common view that philosophy is the steeple on the ivory tower, arcane and inaccessible to the ordinary intelligent person. And by unfortunate association, it paints philosophers as hypocrites who will condescend to criticize others, but not let themselves be judged.

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